

Building Blocks

A PUBLICATION OF FIRST 5 CALIFORNIA

VOLUME 2, ISSUE 3



Going to Scale with Pre-Kindergarten: Moving Toward High-Quality Early Learning Opportunities for All California 3- and 4-Year-Olds

In our last issue of *Building Blocks* we presented a bold new vision of education for California's children, from birth through university, as proposed by the Legislature's Joint Committee in its new California Master Plan for Education. Recognizing that early childhood development begins before birth and continues to about age 8, the Plan calls for a reorganization and expansion of our education system to make early education and comprehensive support available to all young children, beginning prenatally and continuing in a seamless and developmentally appropriate way through kindergarten to the third grade and beyond.

An important part of this task is ensuring that schools are ready to meet the needs of the children who come to them as kindergartners. But very young children are already learning, and the two years leading up to kindergarten present a special window of opportunity to make sure that they have the kinds of experiences that will help them do well in their first year in the K-12 system.

In this issue, we explore in more detail a key element of the birth-to-elementary school model: guaranteed access to high-quality pre-kindergarten education for all 3- and 4-year-olds, with a special emphasis on quality.

Why Focus on Pre-Kindergarten?

As the science of early childhood development tells us, a child's preparation for school and for life begins not with preschool at age 3, but much earlier, starting with a healthy pregnancy and continuing with nurturing, stimulating experiences through infancy, the toddler years and beyond. In recognition of infants' and toddlers' needs, partners in First 5 California are improving families' access to health and mental health services for very young children and giving parents and child

care providers (including neighbors and relatives) the knowledge, support and tools to provide their children with developmentally appropriate care.

As we continue these efforts and others on behalf of infants and toddlers, however, recent research findings and a supportive climate of public opinion in California suggest that the time is right for a phased initiative to dramatically improve the accessibility and quality of pre-kindergarten programs for all 3- and 4-year-olds in California. High-quality pre-kindergarten experiences help reduce performance gaps in the first grade, which in turn have been shown to lay the foundation for observed performance gaps in later grades.¹ Recent longitudinal studies have found that children exposed to high-quality preschool show lasting gains on a variety of educational and other dimensions all the way into adulthood, with significant associated cost savings.² Several states around the country have responded to these findings by establishing universal preschool programs, notably Georgia and New York (though not fully funded), which offer free pre-kindergarten education to all 4-year-olds.³ Many other states are designing new programs and several governors have pledged to establish them.

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A Picture of High-Quality Pre-Kindergarten: Young Learners Get a Good Start in Live Oak Program

The importance of quality in pre-kindergarten education is widely recognized. But what does quality look like, and how do children and families experience it? High-quality programs are offered in many different public and private settings, not necessarily school-based, from centers to large family day care homes. Here we take a closer look at the elements of quality as they appear in a state-subsidized preschool program for children and families in Live Oak Elementary School District in Santa Cruz. Nationally accredited, the program also receives support from First 5 Santa Cruz County.



Like policy-makers in New York, Georgia and other states that have already established them, the California Legislature based its call for universal pre-kindergarten programs on research findings showing that high-quality pre-kindergarten benefits children in lasting ways. Children who attend such programs engage in more complex activities with peers, show significant cognitive gains during early childhood, perform better academically compared with children in low-quality programs and are more likely to make normal progress through the primary grades. According to a major national study conducted in 1999, the quality of classroom practice is related to children's cognitive development, while the closeness of the relationship between preschool teacher and child influences children's social development through the early school years.¹ Longitudinal studies have shown that children continue to benefit from these early experiences all the way to adulthood, with significant associated cost savings.²

The Elements of Quality

High-quality preschool for children has a number of dimensions reflecting the multifaceted nature of early childhood development. Among the most important attributes of quality are:

- A safe, engaging and age-appropriate environment, rich with language and print, that reflects the cultural diversity of children's backgrounds.
- Inclusion for children with disabilities and special needs.
- A welcoming atmosphere for parents, with high parent involvement.
- Continuous assessments that help staff and parents gauge children's progress.
- Highly-trained staff that respond to children's emotional needs.
- Effective curriculum that offers children choices, interesting content, and activities in individual, small-group and large-group formats, along with ample opportunities for leisurely exploration and free play.³ Such programs nurture children's



interest in learning about the world and how it works, help them develop language skills and early literacy, foster their self-confidence and self-expression, and help them develop social relationships with both adults and other children.

While all children can benefit from these opportunities, they have been shown to be especially important for lower-income children who are least likely to be well-prepared for kindergarten. To provide the high-quality preschool experience that young children need, programs need well-trained, well-compensated professional staff that are sensitive to the specific needs of the children and families in their community and work within a framework of developmentally appropriate guidelines. Ideally, pre-kindergarten programs also work in close communication with the K-12 schools their children will attend.

Green Acres Preschool, one of three pre-kindergarten programs operated by the Live Oak School District's Child Development Program, offers a good illustration of a quality preschool program.

Although the Live Oak programs are part of the state's formal preschool system, similar programs can exist in many different settings. Funded by the California Department of Education's State Preschool program and with additional support from First 5 Santa Cruz County, the Green Acres Preschool offers a three-hour program at no cost to low-income families. In addition to meeting State Preschool standards, the program is also accredited by the National Association for the Education of Young Children.

Working to Meet the Needs of Children and Families

Green Acres families, many of them Latino, East Indian or Vietnamese immigrants, live in a densely populated, unincorporated area of Santa Cruz County. Housing consists largely of aging apartment buildings and trailer parks, with relatively few services and limited public transportation. Many families, working at jobs with odd hours for relatively low wages are hard-pressed to find time and resources to provide their children with the learning opportunities they need.

As families have come under increasing pressure, the Live Oak School Dis-

"The district has really embraced the notion that we're a pre-K-8 district."

*--Live Oak Child Development
Director Tricia Pastor*

trict has recognized a need to provide better support for the young children who will be entering their system. With help from First 5 Santa Cruz County, over the past several years district and preschool staff have worked to refine and strengthen the preschool program, focusing on parent involvement and support, staff development, curriculum and,

importantly, communication and alignment between pre-kindergarten and kindergarten. “The district has really embraced the notion that we’re a pre-K-8 district,” says Tricia Pastor, director of child development for the district. Child development staff positions have been professionalized and pay levels upgraded to make Live Oak preschool salary schedules comparable to those in the elementary school. Many preschool staff now have site supervisor permits and several are credentialed teachers who have taught kindergarten.

A Commitment to Professional Development

Professional development and continuing program improvement are ongoing commitments at all Live Oak preschools. To ensure they are providing children the best possible experience on all dimensions of development, staff recently attended 21 hours of training on the California Department of Education’s pre-kindergarten learning and development guidelines with training stipends from the CARES program, which is supported by a \$1 million grant from First 5 Santa Cruz County.

“A school-ready child is a whole child.”

*—Live Oak Child Development
Director Tricia Pastor*

Because so many of their children had little or no exposure to books and reading at home—often living in very crowded conditions, or even in cars or homeless shelters—staff also identified a need to work on early literacy. All preschool staff attended the Early Steps to Reading Success/HeadsUp! Reading course, sponsored in part by First 5 California, which focuses on creating early literacy experiences for children throughout the day, and how to set group and individual goals for children’s learning.

In addition, the district hired a literacy coach to work with preschool staff and parents. Last year, reading specialist and kindergarten teacher Nancy Locatelli worked with teachers to help them extend literature into follow-up activities, teach beginning phonemic awareness more effectively and develop other early literacy strategies. To make sure the children have plenty of opportunities to explore the materials that many do not have at home, she stocks the writing centers and dramatic play areas with books and writing pads. “This way the children can get experience in holding pencils and making marks, beginning to learn and write the letters of their name. When kids see

their names around the room, they understand the purposes for print, and it motivates them to try for themselves.”

The preschool also established a literacy night for parents and a parent lending library. At each regular monthly parent meeting, parents are also given a take-home literacy activity they can do with their children.

Putting all their training to work through weekly curriculum planning, teachers set objectives for the week and tie planned activities for each day to the results they lead to. For instance, while gluing tissue paper onto three different shapes (square, circle, triangle), children are becoming personally and socially competent and effective learners, and in the “lacing letters” activity, they practice letter recognition and small motor skills. As is now required of State Preschools, each child’s progress is assessed according to the four key developmental competencies from the California Department of Education’s Desired Results for Young Children:

- Children are personally and socially competent
- Children are effective learners
- Children show physical and motor competence
- Children are safe and healthy

Not a form of grading, these assessments offer a useful method of charting observations that can help both teachers and parents foster each child’s further growth and development.

A Safe, Engaging and Stimulating Place for Children

All this preparation makes a difference. The visitor to Green Acres Preschool finds children playing together with blocks, drawing or reading with visiting parents or other adults. The space is bright, comfortable and clean, with furnishings and decorations in child-scale; supplies and toys are stored in cubby holes at the children’s level, with neatly written labels where the children can see them. Pictures and print cover the walls in English and Spanish. As children sit together sharing graham crackers at snack time, or simply as they move around the room, one sees them learning to navigate in a new and stimulating physical environment, forming social relationships and negotiating with other children, learning new routines and ways of behaving and learning how to express themselves, listen and make independent decisions.



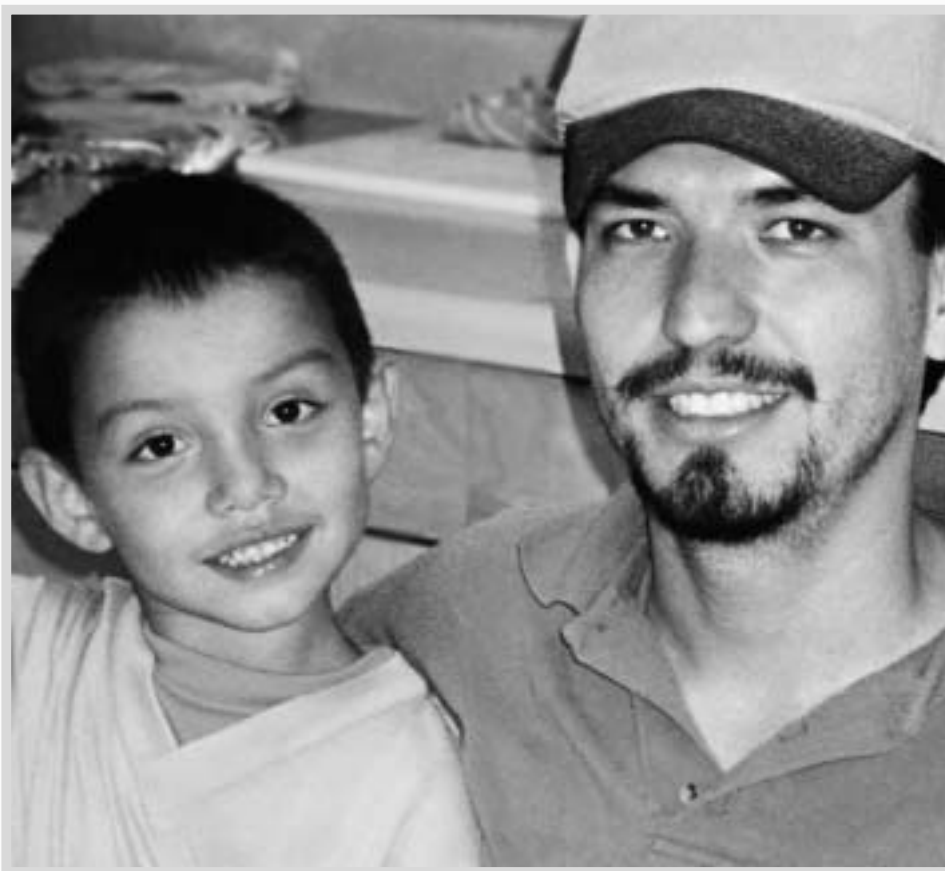
While there is plenty of independent time for exploring and playing with other children, staff also invite the children into carefully designed group activities that address multiple aspects of development. During reading time, the teachers gather a group of children around in a circle on the floor to read from a large-format book with pages displayed on a small easel so that the children can easily see the words and pictures. While this is obviously a literacy activity, it also teaches the children other important social behaviors as they practice focusing, listening and getting along with others in a group setting.

It is three weeks into the program, and the more experienced children, returning from last year, know what to expect and look up eagerly. Some of the first-timers, still unfamiliar with the patterns of preschool, have trouble sitting still, but are gently encouraged to stay in the circle. The most restless ones get cuddled on adults' laps. At the same time, the children are learning about books. Referring back to an earlier lesson, Master Teacher Sarah Dorfmeister asks them, "What does the author of the book do? Write the words or draw the pictures?" Some of the children call out the answer. "That's right, the author writes the words. What does the illustrator do?"

A moment later, the children are encouraged to think of themselves as readers who will read to others. "Who could you read the book to? Could you read it to your sister? Your teddy bear? Who wants to read the book to your mother?" The children all cry, "Me! I do," and wave their hands enthusiastically.

Parents Participate and Note Their Children's Growth

Green Acres Preschool staff work to make sure parents feel at home in their children's program. Parents are invited to an initial welcome and orientation in which they learn about preschool proce-



Noe Alfaro, with his son Jordan, spending time at Green Acres Preschool.

dures and brainstorm the kinds of results they hope to see for their children during the year. In addition, parents are asked to come to the preschool for one three-hour visit each month at a time convenient for them. Parent-teacher conferences are held twice a year.

Noe Alfaro, father of three, is visiting today, playing with his son Jordan, age 4-1/2. He says visiting the preschool is easy—his boss at the apartment complex where he works gives him time off—and he feels his family is welcome. His wife came to this year's orientation and would come to monthly visits as well, but is at home with their new baby.

Jordan has been here three weeks and his dad reports that he is happy. "Last year, Jordan played outside at the apartments where we live, but he wasn't in any program," Mr. Alfaro says. He heard about the program from a friend whose daughter was enrolled and thought it would be a good thing for his son. Asked why he likes coming to school, Jordan says, "I like to see my friends." He also says he likes painting

and balancing blocks—an activity during which, the center director points out, he is learning seriation, or ordering things from biggest to smallest.

In three weeks, Dad says Jordan is already bringing his learning home. "Already he is trying to read books at home. He didn't do that before. He looks for his big sister's books and tries to explain what's in them. He works with the alphabet on the computer at home." According to his father, Jordan talks more than he did before, telling his family in detail about what he learns, often in English, and practicing new health and hygiene habits he has learned at school. The family primarily speaks Spanish at home, but Mr. Alfaro, who speaks some English himself, seems pleased that his son is taking to this second language so quickly.

Another parent, Olga Gallardo, a single mother of two who works full-time, says the program has been very important for her family. "The program takes a big load off me," she says. Her 4-year-old daughter, Kiana, is in the program now and her

5-year-old, Amanda, now in kindergarten, went through it last year. She says the educational and social experiences her children have gained in the program have really made a difference, especially for her older daughter Amanda. "I was concerned about her. She needed to learn patience," her mother says. "She needed more exposure to other children. Without this program she wouldn't have been as prepared as she is now for kindergarten. Now she's even better prepared than many of the other children in her class."

The fact that the program is subsidized is also very important for Ms. Gallardo. "Otherwise I wouldn't be able to afford to have my girls in pre-kindergarten at all. I looked at other programs. It would have cost \$800 a month. It was either rent or preschool." She is glad not to have had to make that choice. "The location is great, close to home," Ms. Gallardo says. "The

teachers are great. My kids bonded with the teachers and the teachers seem to enjoy being with the children. The children are having fun and they're learning."

Preschool and Kindergarten Staff Planning for Transition

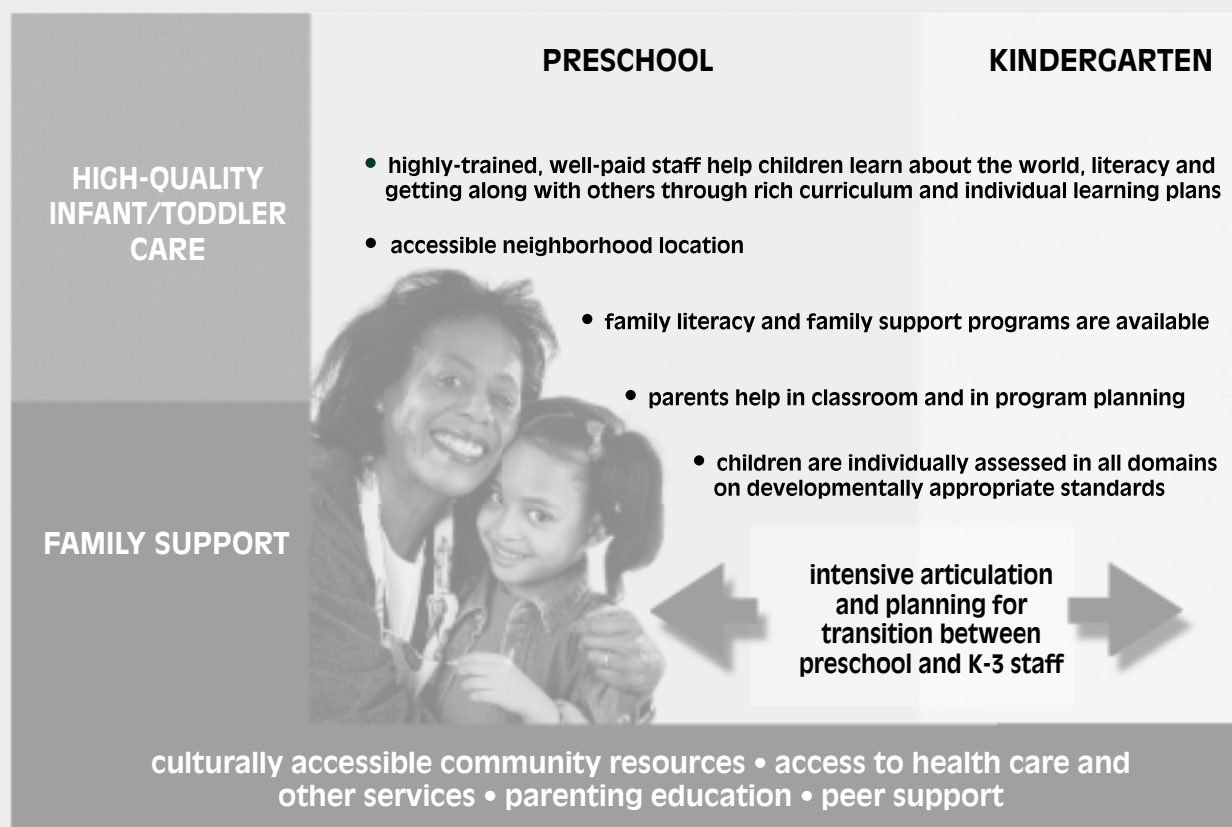
To make sure children's experiences and progress are not lost as they move from preschool to kindergarten, for the past two years preschool and kindergarten staff have held articulation meetings in which they share goals and observations. The meetings have helped preschool teachers learn more about current expectations of children entering kindergarten and to share ideas about how best to help children meet these demands. Kindergarten teachers have also come away with a deeper understanding of the educational work that goes on in preschool. Staff report that the meetings have opened up

a new level of dialogue and comfort between the two staffs. This year, for the first time, a preschool teacher participates in the Student Study Team of a former student who is now in kindergarten. The meetings also resulted in a kindergarten tour for preschoolers. Teachers' observations of the children's development also go with each child to his or her kindergarten teacher, along with preschool portfolios.

Children Give Thumbs Up

Five 4-year-olds sitting on the floor are shy with a visitor, but all smile and nod their heads vigorously when asked if they like it here, and all agree that if they had a baby brother or sister, he or she should definitely come to preschool. Noah says he would tell a baby brother or sister about "the blocks and the Legos and the waffle blocks." Sarah, an observant, bright-eyed little girl, says she would tell them about

High-Quality Preschool in Family-School-Community Context





her favorite book about the lady who swallowed the pie. She adds, "I like my teachers because they tell everybody things."

Amber likes drawing and playing with her friends. Andres likes playing with the cars.

In the nurturing preschool setting, the children's distinct personalities and learning styles emerge, and the teachers recognize and respond to them, seeing each child not just in cognitive terms but as a whole person. Commenting on Sarah's outgoing behavior in a small group, her teacher remarks, "Sarah has grown so much, she's such a leader now. At the beginning she was more reserved, not as active. Now she's really taking charge of her own learning."

With their curiosity about people and the world, their readiness to make friends and their interest in books, children like Jordan, Sarah and others in high-quality pre-kindergarten programs like Green Acres Preschool will be ready to succeed in kindergarten, and it is clear that their pre-kindergarten experiences will have made a major difference in preparing them.

While existing pre-kindergarten programs across the state differ according to their format and the unique characteristics of the communities they serve, all can work toward offering the highest quality of caring, stimulating, family-friendly environments for children that will allow all to meet their full potential. In time, many new programs will need to be created to make sure these same opportunities are universally available for every young child in the state. ■

1. California Department of Education. (2000). *Pre-kindergarten learning and development guidelines*. Sacramento: California Department of Education.

2. A.J. Reynolds, J.A. Temple, D.L. Robertson, and Emily A. Mann (June, 2001). *Age 21 cost-benefit analysis of the Title I Chicago Child-Parent Center Program, Executive Summary*. Presented at the annual meeting of the Society for Prevention Research in Washington, D.C.

3. California Department of Education. (2000). *Pre-kindergarten learning and development guidelines*. Sacramento: California Department of Education.

SUPPORT FOR FAMILIES THROUGH THE LIVE OAK FAMILY RESOURCE CENTER

While many parents find it easy to participate in and support their children's preschool experience, others may be unaware of the importance of early learning and literacy, may be unfamiliar or uncomfortable with the educational expectations in a new culture or may be overtaxed by the stresses and challenges of daily living. For the past year, preschool staff have been able to refer families who need additional support over to the new Live Oak Family Resource Center. Funded in part by nearly \$1 million from First 5 Santa Cruz County, the Family Resource Center offers families access to low-cost health care through Healthy Families, provides outreach and referral to pre-kindergarten programs and offers home visitation and intensive case management for 0- to 5-year-olds and their families, as well as other services. To make sure families know about activities they can join and services that are available to them, a First 5 California-funded outreach worker goes to school events, parks, Laundromats and door to door, offering information and answering questions.

The Center also has a special focus on helping the area's many recent Latino immigrant families deal with the conflicts they may experience between their traditional cultures and the American culture their children are entering. While many parents welcome their children's introduction to reading, Center Director Elizabeth Schilling says that some can be anxious about the schools' expectations and the new book bags their children bring home. One mother who cannot read says she was upset because she felt she couldn't teach her child about the world in the same way she had learned, by sitting on her grandfather's lap as he told stories. "We try to help parents think about how to approach their own literacy, and to give them options," she says. The center offers many culturally sensitive and easily accessible programs for young children and their families.



In Large and Small Counties, Plans Underway for Universal Preschool

Several First 5 County Commissions around the state have begun guaranteeing access to preschool for their children. Here we briefly summarize plans now underway in Los Angeles, Alpine and San Mateo Counties.

Los Angeles County

This summer, First 5 LA made news by committing \$100 million to launch a Universal Access to Preschool Including Early Care and Education Initiative. The initiative aims to eventually provide access to a high-quality preschool experience for all children in Los Angeles County. The initiative has a proposed 10-year timeline with a five-year investment from the Commission. Partnerships and collaborations are expected to sustain the initiative for the remaining five years.

While specific strategies are currently in development, First 5 LA will explore meeting families' needs through the development of partnerships with a variety of programs that offer early care and education, such as Head Start, State Preschool and School Districts, as well as child care centers, family child care homes, community-based organizations, faith-based organizations and private providers.

First 5 LA hopes that services will eventually be available for up to 70 percent of the county's nearly 300,000 pre-kindergartners.

First 5 LA plans to optimize the \$100 million allocation by leveraging funds to serve the greatest number of families. Because the demand for services cannot be fully met by the current funding allocation, First 5 LA will have to establish additional funding. In addition to creating new pre-kindergarten slots, program planners will work to improve existing preschool programs and raise the quality of the early care and education workforce. These objectives will be accomplished by new early education standards and assessments, better professional development and higher compensation for early childhood educators in the county. To address the need for more and better child development facilities, the initiative will work with the Los Angeles Unified School District to capitalize on the passage of new school construction bonds, and will coordinate efforts with other funders to improve access to facilities and develop infrastructure.

The initiative will also address the current gap between public education and the system of early childhood development and education. By better integrating these two systems, children and their families will experience a more seamless transition.

The county is now in a 12-month planning stage to further refine the elements of the program and create a 10-year master plan for achieving the desired outcome. First 5 LA is also working on implementing programs and services that will be launched during the initiative's first year. Recently, First 5 LA hired a planning consultant to assist with the development of the master plan and in the near future will establish an Advisory Committee to provide guidance and garner public support for the initiative.

Alpine County

At the other end of the demographic spectrum from Los Angeles is tiny Alpine County, on the Nevada border, with a total population of roughly 1,200 people. In partnership with the Alpine County School District, First 5 Alpine is working on plans to build a facility at a school site in

the centrally located town of Woodfords that will serve 3- and 4-year-olds in the Eastern part of the county. The new facility will make it possible to bring together in a single location several existing programs, including an after-school program and activities for senior citizens. Health and social services, including a dental van and physician visits to the school, have been major elements in the county's strategy for young children, along with improvements in transportation. Partners in the program recently arranged with the Nevada Department of Transportation for a new bus route that will help families get to the new preschool and its associated services.

According to Jim Parsons, co-chair of First 5 Alpine and county superintendent of schools, the intention is to create a high-quality, research-based program run by credentialed staff and offering age-appropriate services that prepare children for success in life and in school. "As a former high school teacher, I know the battle is lost or won in preschool," he says.

San Mateo County

First 5 San Mateo County has committed \$1 million each year for the next 10 years to provide access to high-quality pre-kindergarten care for the county's 3- to 5-year-olds, beginning with children one year from entering kindergarten. Details of the program will depend on the findings of an intensive countywide feasibility study, funded by the Packard Foundation, which will include financial assessments for several different program scenarios. According to Executive Director Kris Perry, any model adopted by the Commission will emphasize both quality of care and equal access, and will incorporate both subsidies and parent fees. While initial eligibility will likely focus on working poor parents earning incomes up to 300 percent of the Federal Poverty Level, the Commission will also aim to increase middle-income families' access to high-quality centers.

Perry says that they will also work to boost the quality of existing sites through multilevel interventions that strengthen parent education, family support and linkages with schools.

Because the \$1 million annual set-aside will not be enough to make universal access a reality in the county, Perry adds that First 5 San Mateo County will be exploring other funding mechanisms that can supplement existing and projected resources. ■



Building the Infrastructure for High-Quality Pre-Kindergarten Programs

As counties and neighborhoods work to make high-quality pre-kindergarten available to more young children in their local communities, First 5 California has initiated several innovative efforts that take a systemic approach to improving the quality of early education across the state. Here we highlight three programs that help sites achieve national accreditation, strengthen professional development and collaboration among pre-kindergarten and kindergarten staff, and offer early childhood educators increased compensation and other incentives that can help them remain in the child development field.

Accreditation Project Helps Providers Improve Quality

Providers of formal child development programs in California must meet various state licensing requirements and standards. Currently only a very small number of these providers—fewer than one in 100 family child care providers, and fewer than one in 20 centers—have also earned accreditation from the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), which sets the highest standards of care. Research conducted by NAEYC has shown that accredited programs consistently offer a higher quality of service for children, as predicted by the presence of highly educated staff, developmentally appropriate and child-centered environments, better health and safety provisions and better relations with parents.

To help providers achieve the highest standard, First 5 California and the California Department of Education have created the Child Development Facility Accreditation Project (CDFAP), which helps state-subsidized child development centers and family child care providers in areas of highest need successfully apply for accreditation from the appropriate national accrediting body. Total funding for the project is \$13 million, consisting of \$8 million in First 5 California funds and \$5 million from the General Fund, which pays for technical assistance and site enhancements. The project, which is being implemented by the California Association for the Education of Young Children (CAEYC), began in June 2001 and will be completed in December 2003.

Through CAEYC, 25 regional facilitators visit sites, offer mentoring and help sites connect with more advanced providers from whom they can learn. Sites that pass an initial screening are evaluated more thoroughly, then undergo an intensive course composed of

broadcast training sessions, self-study and module training, including Early Steps to Reading Success. They also complete a CAEYC-designed project that covers all areas for accreditation on CD-ROM with live-taped video. Candidates then create an enhancement plan, indicating strengths and areas for improvement.

To cover needed enhancements such as professional development and facilities improvements, CDFAP provides an average of \$5,000 per center and \$500 per home. After completing all elements of the plan and passing a site visit, successful candidates will be accredited by the NAEYC, the National Association for Family Child Care or the National School Age Care Alliance.

According to Director Tom Kubasak, many providers who were unaware of the higher standards and the opportunity to reach them have been eager to take advantage of the support CDFAP provides. The program aims to accredit approximately 370 child care centers and 900 family child care homes, which would more than double the current number of accredited facilities.

Reading Institutes and Distance Learning Teach Thousands About Literacy

To help ensure that young children enter kindergarten ready to learn to read, First 5 California, the Governor's office, the University of California, California State University, California Community Colleges and CAEYC are collaborating to bring professional development in reading instruction to thousands of early childhood educators and parents statewide.

Early Steps to Reading Success is one of the first statewide efforts to bring together early childhood educators and K-primary teachers to work as a team. The program aims to build and sustain a network of pre-kindergarten and K-3 professional development programs with a strong parent involvement and parent education component. The program will expand the summer Reading Professional Development Institutes—which brings professional development in reading instruction to early childhood educators—to include 6,000 teachers of 4-year-olds in state-funded preschools that feed into low-performing schools.

Heads Up! Reading, an interactive distance learning course developed by the National Head Start Association and coordinated by the CAEYC, is a seven-week course focusing on gateways to literacy. The program is designed for teachers and parents who work

with children from birth to age 5, with priority given to those serving children at the greatest risk of school failure. Funded by a \$5 million grant from First 5 California, HeadsUp! Reading has been delivered through satellites in child care centers, preschools, community and four-year colleges, county offices of education and other sites across the state. The program will reach 2,000 teachers and 4,000 parents, providing stipends, instructional materials and early childhood books.

Provider Retention Project Aims to Spur Stability and Growth in the Child Care Field

The Matching Funds for Early Care and Education Providers project is an important piece of California's efforts to improve training and compensation for early childhood educators.

The three-year project was developed by First 5 California in collaboration with the Child Development Division of the California Department of Education and First 5/County Children and Families Commissions. The program builds upon the California CARES bill (AB212), aiming to continue to support the development of a skilled and stable child care workforce through continuing education and professional development.

Counties are invited to devise ways of improving training retention by increasing compensation for early childhood educators, offering them stipends, respite time, benefit packages and bonuses tied to continued education or other professional development activities. Such programs increase salaries and/or benefits for committed professionals without shifting the burden of these additional costs to families. Participating counties have devised many promising strategies to help develop the careers and bolster the salaries of their local early care and education professionals. While individual approaches may vary, most programs offer wage supplements based upon the provider's education, background and ability to speak multiple languages. Stipends increase as providers pursue additional education. Participating counties will take part in a statewide evaluation of the retention programs conducted by UC Berkeley's Policy Analysis for California Education.

Seventy-five million dollars from First 5 California, First 5/County Commissions and other local investments have been dedicated to retention incentive programs throughout the state, reaching an estimated 20,000 early childhood educators. ■

Focus groups conducted earlier this year for First 5 California with a diverse group of Californians have found public support for universal pre-kindergarten in California as well. Believing that the years from birth to age 3 is the domain of parents, many Californians are reluctant to support large-scale public interventions for infants and toddlers. But many are deeply concerned about the quality of K-12 education in California, and they do see a need to help 3- and 4-year-olds become better prepared for formal education. To take advantage of the fact that children are already learning long before age 5, and to ensure that all children have an equal chance for educational success, many feel that public education should start at age 3.

Quality is What Counts

According to kindergarten teachers, a child who is ready for kindergarten is physically healthy, rested, well-nourished, can tell others his needs, wants and thoughts, and is enthusiastic and curious about new activities.⁴ To encourage readiness along these dimensions, it is important that children are able to form trusting relationships with adults who can ensure they feel safe and cared for, who understand how young children think, feel and reason, and who can create stimulating environments that invite their curiosity. While well-prepared parents or informal caregivers can also provide these opportunities, group experiences in high-quality pre-kindergarten programs offer children additional benefits that are important for success in school. Staffed by knowledgeable and caring professionals who understand the differences between children, high-quality programs help children form independent trusting relationships outside the family and learn how to interact with other children and develop positive social relationships, all while absorbing new opportunities to learn about the environment, about literacy and about the creative possibilities of play and group interaction.⁵

Children enrolled in publicly supported child development services such as Head Start, State Preschool or State General Child Care and Development programs generally receive high-quality services, and research shows that they benefit accordingly. But the thousands of young Californians in mediocre or poor quality programs—or who are in no program at all—are equally affected by what they experience. Furthermore, inadequate programs can do serious harm. Any approach to offering universal preschool must therefore go beyond a focus on increasing the number of available slots to ensure that both existing and new preschool

programs offer children the best possible experiences to help them develop physically, socially, emotionally and cognitively.

Universal Preschool and First 5 California's School Readiness Initiative

For a number of communities participating in First 5 California's School Readiness Initiative, which targets children from birth to age 5 living in the attendance areas of California's lowest-performing schools, a high-quality pre-kindergarten experience for the children who need it most is already a key part of the Initiative. Those communities with pre-kindergarten programs are meeting the needs of 3- and 4-year-olds in many different ways by expanding Head Start or State Preschool or by sending visiting educators to work with parents of 3- and 4-year-olds in their homes. Through various approaches, the Initiative works to ensure that children and their families have the best available supports and services to be successful in kindergarten and beyond, and that systems are in place to make the kindergarten transition a smooth one.

Because early learning programs bring together all the family and school linkages that support a high-quality pre-kindergarten education, the Initiative offers a natural place to start in planning for universal preschool. But, because needs also exist in areas outside current eligibility criteria, universal preschool programs can supplement and extend services well beyond the Initiative, operating in settings that are school-linked but not school-based, and eventually reaching children in families with higher incomes.

Structural Challenges

Making more high-quality pre-kindergarten programs available for many more children will not be easy. Statewide, planners need to improve the condition of facilities and find accessible locations and funding for new ones. Many more and better-trained early childhood educators are needed. To attract qualified new people to the field and to retain skilled pre-kindergarten teachers, compensation must be increased and career ladders improved. High-quality standards for curriculum, staffing, health, safety and other important program dimensions must be developed, disseminated and implemented. Programs will need to be responsive to families' needs, creating culturally and linguistically friendly environments in neighborhood locations that are easily accessible, offering services during non-traditional working hours. Finally, elementary schools must contribute by help-

ing children and families adjust to kindergarten, providing instruction based on how children learn and engaging parents as partners in the education process.

Moving Forward

The California Master Plan for Education proposes to make high-quality preschool an integral part of the K-12 system, making it available to families of 3- and 4-year-olds in California who choose to enroll their children. Developing such a universal statewide system will take time and will require a significant investment of resources beyond those that First 5 California can provide. Over the next six months, First 5 California will work with the Packard Foundation and Pew Charitable Trusts to explore delivery models and funding mechanisms for a new statewide system, taking into account the state's current economic climate. In the meantime, however, several First 5/Children and Families County Commissions are already moving forward with the concept of universal preschool in their jurisdictions, funding partnerships that target those children first who need it most. And neighborhood providers in communities around the state are working to make their individual preschool programs the best they can be for the children and families they serve.

In this issue of *Building Blocks* we take an in-depth look at the elements of high-quality pre-kindergarten through one California preschool. We also explore local and state initiatives now underway to improve both the quantity and quality of pre-kindergarten education for the young children who are the future of our state. ■

1. Cunningham, A.E. and Stanovich, K.E. (1997). *Early reading acquisition and its relation to reading experience and ability 10 years later*. Developmental Psychology, 33(6), 934-945.

2. A.J. Reynolds, J.A. Temple, D.L. Robertson, and Emily A. Mann (June, 2001). *Age 21 cost-benefit analysis of the Title I Chicago Child-Parent Center Program, Executive Summary*. Presented at the annual meeting of the Society for Prevention Research in Washington, D.C.

3. For more on universal preschool in other states see *Building Blocks*, Volume 2, Issue 2.

4. National Center for Education Statistics. (1993). *Public School kindergarten teachers' views on children's readiness for school*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Educational Research and Improvement.

5. California Department of Education. (2000). *Pre-kindergarten learning and development guidelines*. Sacramento: California Department of Education.

First 5 California - Facts at a Glance

What is the California Children and Families Act?

In November 1998, voters passed Proposition 10, an initiative that added a 50 cent-per-pack tax on cigarettes to fund education, health, child care and other programs to promote early childhood development, from prenatal to age 5. The California Children and Families Act, which was created through the passage of Prop. 10, was designed to address the lack of public funding and support for early childhood development in the wake of a growing body of scientific evidence indicating the emotional, physical, social and developmental environment to which children are exposed has a profound impact on their ability to reach their greatest potential in school and in life.

How does it work? First 5 California/Children and Families Commission at the state level and California's 58 County Commissions are carrying out the work of the initiative.

First 5 California is the leadership agency and statewide coordinator for the California Children and Families Act. First 5 California provides oversight, training and assistance to the County Commissions and statewide education on the importance of early childhood development. In addition, 20 percent of the overall revenue is administered by First 5 California to conduct research and evaluation on the best policies and practices for young children; to develop education, infrastructure and training programs for parents, child care providers and other professionals; to conduct broad, media-based public education campaigns; and to offer support and technical assistance to County Commissions.

The bulk of the funds, 80 percent, go directly to the County Commissions. The County Commissions must develop strategic plans consistent with First 5 California guidelines on funding local child development programs and services but they also have maximum flexibility in tailoring funding and programs to local needs. Some First 5 California requirements for County

Commissions include obtaining broad public input and submitting audits on spending.

The California Children and Families Act mandates that the State and County Commissions form at least one advisory committee to provide expertise and support. First 5 California has established an Advisory Committee on Diversity, charged with helping to ensure that statewide programs meet the needs of California's ethnically, linguistically and culturally diverse population and children with special needs and disabilities.

How are Commissioners chosen? First 5 California's Commission is comprised of seven members appointed by the Governor, the Speaker of the Assembly and the Senate Rules Committee. The Secretary for Education and the Secretary of the Health and Human Services Agency also serve as ex-officio members. At the local level, each county Board of Supervisors appoints a five to nine member Commission to include a member of the Board of Supervisors and two members from among those who manage county functions (e.g., behavioral health services, social services, or tobacco prevention and treatment services). The remaining members can be drawn from county functions or organizations that work in the early childhood development arena. ■

The California Children and Families Commission has adopted "First 5 California" as its new overarching school readiness identity. We believe that the name First 5 California conveys the importance of the first five years of life, the period of time during which a child's brain develops most dramatically. The new name will be used in all Commission public education efforts, on any printed materials developed and, over time, may become the primary identity of the organization.

CALIFORNIA CHILDREN AND FAMILIES COMMISSION

Commissioners:

S. Kimberly Belshè, a program director at the James Irvine Foundation and the former director of the California Department of Health Services, brings to the Commission an extensive knowledge of California's health programs.

Elizabeth Rice Grossman is a retired investment professional who brings a commitment to philanthropy and children's issues to the Commission. She currently serves as a member of the Juvenile Probation Commission in the City and County of San Francisco, is on the Board of Directors for The Omega Boys Club and manages two charitable foundations with her family.

Sandra Gutierrez, an expert in the development of child care services, is currently the California project director for Child Care Programs at The Enterprise Foundation. Previously, she served as project coordinator for the Child Care Law Project.

Karen Hill-Scott, Ed.D., is nationally known for her work in child care and development. President of her own children's television consulting firm, she is also a co-founder and board member of Crystal Stairs, Inc., and an adjunct professor of planning at UCLA.

Rob Reiner, a filmmaker and activist for infants and young children, serves as the chair of the Commission after devoting substantial time and resources to the passage of Proposition 10 as part of his crusade to shift the national consciousness to value early childhood development.

Louis A. Vismara, M.D., is a founding member of the M.I.N.D. Institute at the University of California, Davis. The interdisciplinary organization brings together researchers, clinicians, educators, parents and children to investigate and provide resources for a wide range of neurodevelopment disorders, from autism to learning disabilities. He also serves as a consultant to State Senator John Burton.

Ex-Officio Members:

Grantland Johnson, Secretary of the California Health and Human Services Agency (CHHS), has appointed Assistant Secretary of Programs and Fiscal Affairs for CHHS, Genie Chough, to serve on the Commission in his place. Previously, Ms. Chough served as Assistant Director of the Domestic Policy Council for the White House focusing on foster care, child welfare and health care issues.

Kerry Mazzoni, as Governor Davis' Secretary for Education, has appointed Assistant Secretary for Education, Theresa Garcia, to serve on the Commission in her place. Ms. Garcia brings a strong background in education issues and policy and program analysis to her post. She currently directs the Office's broad range of policy activities related to early childhood and K-12 education.

Staff:

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Building Blocks is a publication of First 5 California.

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